



Falling Through the Cracks: Dealing with the Problem of the Unclassifieds in RELTRAD

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Abstract

Background RELTRAD is the most popular and widely used classification scheme for sorting religious traditions in the social sciences, however it struggles with how to sort non-denominational Protestants into one of the existing categories, with a growing number falling into an often ignored “unclassified” category.

Purpose To demonstrate the growing problem of excluding non-denominational protestants who attend infrequently in the current iteration of RELTRAD. We assess the assumption that the “unclassified” respondents are akin to those who select a “don’t know” option and should be excluded. We also propose several ways to reintroduce low attending non-denominationalists back into the larger sample.

Methods As a means to assess the political and religious characteristics of these “unclassified” respondents, we compare non-denominationalists to a prototypical evangelical denomination—the Southern Baptist Convention and a prototypical mainline denomination—the United Methodist Church using General Social Survey data from 2000 to 2018. We also re-run models of social and political phenomena, originally shown by Steensland et al. (Soc Forces 79:291, 2000), with the new and old RELTRAD categories.

Results Analyses indicate that non-denominational Protestants who attend church at least once a month have similar characteristics to evangelicals, justifying their current classification. However, non-denominationalists who attend less frequently are more difficult to sort cleanly as they are more conservative than United Methodists but more liberal than Southern Baptists. However, the gaps caused by attendance among the three groups is comparable, undermining the RELTRAD assumption that low attending non-denominationalists should be excluded from the sample.

Conclusions and Implications We reject the decision to exclude low attending non-denominationalists from samples. Combined with other analyses of non-denominational Christians that show differences by denominationalism, we conclude that the best way forward may be creating an entirely new RELTRAD category for non-denominational Protestants that would solve the problem of the unclassifieds and not lose measure specificity. This choice brings new questions into focus as researchers can acknowledge the rapidly growing non-denominational category and assess the

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degrees of overlap and distinction with traditional religious families in the United States.

Keywords RELTRAD · Measurement · Church attendance · Non-denominational

Introduction

It's fair to say that most social scientists studying American religion are familiar with RELTRAD, which is a shorthand for “religious traditions”—a scheme for classifying religious identifiers that has been widely adopted by researchers from a variety of disciplines. While not nearly the only religious classification approach available (e.g., Johnson 1963; Lehman and Sherkat 2018; Smith 1990), it offers a shortcut for those who are only casually interested in American religion, and provides a framework of identification that has been used hundreds of times. This choice becomes even more pragmatic when considering that there are sets of computer syntax already available online for omnibus survey data from the General Social Survey and American National Election Studies that generate the seven categories of RELTRAD in just a few minutes.

However, we would hazard a guess that most people who have employed the RELTRAD scheme have not looked under the hood of the computer code to see exactly how the seven categories were created to see some of the compromises that must be made into order to get the desired output. One of those compromises used to be a minor concern, but has become a significant flaw in the RELTRAD scheme—the application of an attendance filter for non-denominational Protestants, a filter that is not applied to any other group. We argue that this has become more problematic and less theoretically viable over time as the share of Americans who identify as non-denominational has skyrocketed in the last two decades, leaving a larger and larger share of Americans left out entirely from the RELTRAD scheme as well as from the sample for analysis. We call this growing group the “Unclassifieds.”

A Brief Overview of Religious Classification

When social scientists began to consider the role of religion in American life using survey data, it quickly became apparent that a framework needed to be developed to sort survey respondents into different categories. Perhaps the earliest example is Samuel Stouffer sorting Protestants into Northern and Southern varieties (Stouffer 1955). From there, other approaches were proposed such as Tom Smith's *FUND* classification, which gave every respondent one of the three labels: fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal (Smith 1990). Smith's work was considered to be overly reductive by some (e.g., Green 1996), and never achieved widespread adoption.

However, a system of classifying religion was published just a few years later called RELTRAD (Steensland et al. 2000), which built on the earlier classification work by Green (1996) and was quickly adopted by social scientists. RELTRAD has

maintained its position as the most widely accepted taxonomy over the last two decades (Burge and Lewis 2018). While it has many detractors (e.g., Leege 1996; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Sherkat 2014), its utility lies in its ability to not be overly reductive, aggregate enough cases for analysis in smaller surveys, while also not so complex as to be incomprehensible. It does this by creating seven categories of religious identity: evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, other faith, and no religion.

However, that's not to say that RELTRAD has not seen a fair share of criticism in recent years. For instance, Shelton (2018) poignantly asked: "Is RELTRAD Still the Gold Standard?" He notes a number of limitations with using this approach. Chief among them is a high likelihood of misclassifying evangelical and mainline Protestants (see also Blinded), as well as failing to distinguish among Black Protestants (Shelton and Cobb 2017). Another concern is that RELTRAD's goal of simplicity means lumping together several small, but disparate religious groups, combining Jehovah's Witnesses with Buddhists and Latter-day Saints, which robs the category of any real theoretical or empirical utility. Shifting to massive modern samples, for instance in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, obviates the need for an "other" bucket. A final shortcoming that Shelton notes is the existence of a black Protestant category. Making this measurement decision indicates that black Protestants are somehow different than their non-black evangelical or mainline counterparts, but also insinuates that they are a somewhat monolithic bloc, an assertion that is obviously problematic (Shelton 2018; Shelton and Cobb 2017). Of course, assuming that any of these categories are monolithic would be a mistake (Djupe and Gilbert 2009).

The original authors of RELTRAD have noted that the scheme has its limitations and likely needs to be modified in light of changes to American religion (Woodberry et al. 2012; Steensland et al. 2018). Other approaches to tweak RELTRAD to meet these shifts have been proposed, and many of them are much more limited in scope than the original typology (Lehman and Sherkat 2018; Smith et al. 2018; Burge and Lewis 2018). As part of a symposium regarding the difficulty of measuring American religion, Hackett et al. (2018) made an illuminating suggestion: "Choose the Method for Aggregating Religious Identity that is Most Appropriate for Your Research." Obviously, this is good and sound advice, but we believe it's fair to say that RELTRAD is still going to be implemented by many scholars of American religion because of its ubiquity and ease of use.

The Problem of the Unclassifieds

In the spirit of being transparent about some of the shortcomings of RELTRAD, we would like to point out something that has been overlooked by those who use this scheme in their research—it excludes a significant portion of the American population and that share has only grown in recent years. The issue comes when Steensland et al. confront the problem of non-denominational Protestants or those who claim no denomination at all. The operative question is whether these respondents are actually attending non-denominational churches or whether they selected this category

as a socially-acceptable way of avoiding claiming no religion at all—akin to choosing the middle option or “don’t know” in survey items.

To get around this thorny issue, the authors propose that non-denominational Protestants be parsed based on attendance. To be more specific, the authors sort non-denom/nodenom respondents into the evangelical category “if they attend ‘about once a month or more’” (297). Where do infrequent attenders end up? “Respondents in the nondenom/no-denom category who attend church less than once a month are *omitted from our analysis*” (emphasis ours). Low attending non-denomination/no denomination identifiers are not placed into a no religion category, but instead excluded from the analysis and sample.

As can be quickly ascertained, this has become a problem, both from a data standpoint as well as theoretical one. One of the reasons that RELTRAD is used so extensively is because it is pitched as a measure of religious belonging. But just what belonging means is unclear, a problem that the Unclassifieds illumine. That is, belonging presupposes some degree of involvement—sitting in the pews, exposed to religious doctrine and political messages. The conflation of belonging and behavior seen in the attendance filter only applied to non/no denominationalists begs the question of what it looks like for the rest of the sample. As we will see, vast swaths of Americans claiming religious belonging are non-attenders, meaning that, for many, the seven categories of the taxonomy are simply religious identity measures. Employing a consistent attendance filter across the sample would radically reshape our understanding American religion. And recognizing what the attendance filter does to religious distributions should change how we characterize RELTRAD—as an identity measure.

But what we do with the non-denominationalists should be an empirical question, not left to assumption. Therefore, in what follows, we use several tests to understand whether low attending non-denominationalists behave differently than low attending denominational affiliates. Moreover, we assess whether the Unclassifieds behave and think in the same way as religious nones. If the patterns among the Unclassifieds differ radically from low attending denominational affiliates, then perhaps they should be excluded. If, however, attendance has the same effect on non-denominationalists as it does for their denominational cousins, then that is strong evidence against exclusion.

Data and Results

We draw on the General Social Survey series (with appropriate weights) to demonstrate the nature of the problem since the coding is consistent and this is where the scheme was hatched to begin with. Figure 1 lays bare the seriousness of the issue when employing the attendance filter—lots of people are being left out. For much of the 1970’s through the late 1990’s this problem was small and yielded acceptable losses—between 2 and 3% of the sample was Unclassified. However, in 1998 there was a dramatic increase in Unclassified respondents—jumping to 4.5%—and the number has only risen from there. In both the 2016 and 2018 waves of the GSS, at least 6.5% of all those in sample are excluded. To put that in perspective, if

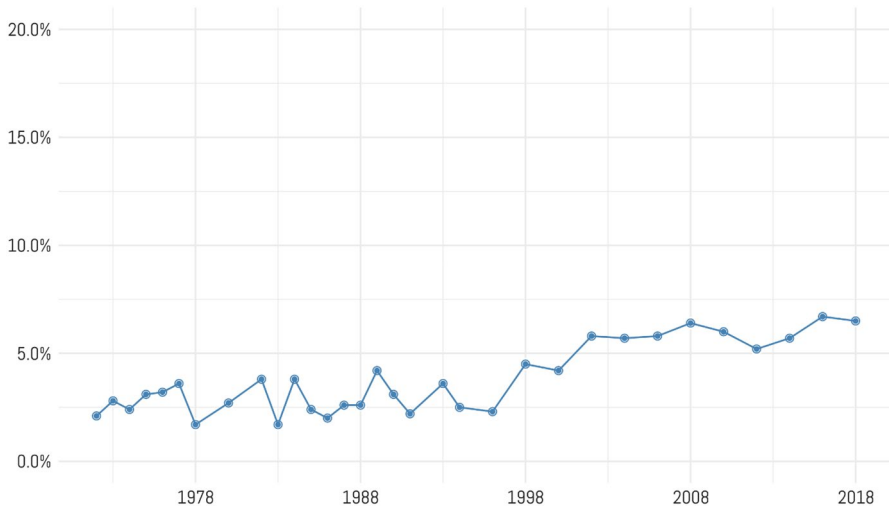


Fig. 1 Share who are unclassified in RELTRAD. *Source:* GSS, 1972–2018

Unclassified was added to the RELTRAD category list, this group would be the fifth largest of eight total groups. There were more Unclassifieds in 2018 than there were Jews, Black Protestants, and those of other faith traditions. Clearly, this is a situation that needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

The primary factor driving this tremendous leap in Unclassifieds is that non-denominational Protestant Christianity has grown rapidly over the last three decades. In 1972, just 3.4% of all Protestants chose a non-denominational identity, but that had jumped nearly sevenfold to 22.9% of all Protestants in 2018 (10.8% of the entire sample). Most of that growth has happened since the mid-1990s. As denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church have both seen declines in membership, non-denominationalists have seen explosive growth.

Figure 2 makes it clear that solving the problem of the Unclassifieds in the GSS has to come to terms with what to do with those who say that they are non-denominational. In almost every year of the GSS dating back to 1972, three quarters of those who don't get sorted into a RELTRAD category in the GSS identified as non-denominational. If researchers could agree on a way to handle non-denominationalists, the share of Unclassifieds would drop to a much more manageable 1.5–2%.¹

So, who are the Unclassifieds? Racially, they are predominantly white (69% in 2018, which is not dissimilar from the overall sample—72.1% in 2018), however African Americans are overrepresented among this group at 24% of Unclassifieds (compared to 16.4% of the entire sample in 2018). The mean age for an Unclassified

¹ In the GSS's "denom" variable there are two response options that are subject to the attendance filter, those who describe their Protestant affiliation as "no denomination" (code=70) and those who indicate "other" (code=60). The "other" group is substantively very small (most years less than 10 respondents and reaching 20 in only two waves of the GSS), as can be seen in Fig. 2. For simplicity we will be lumping both of those groups together as non-denominational throughout.

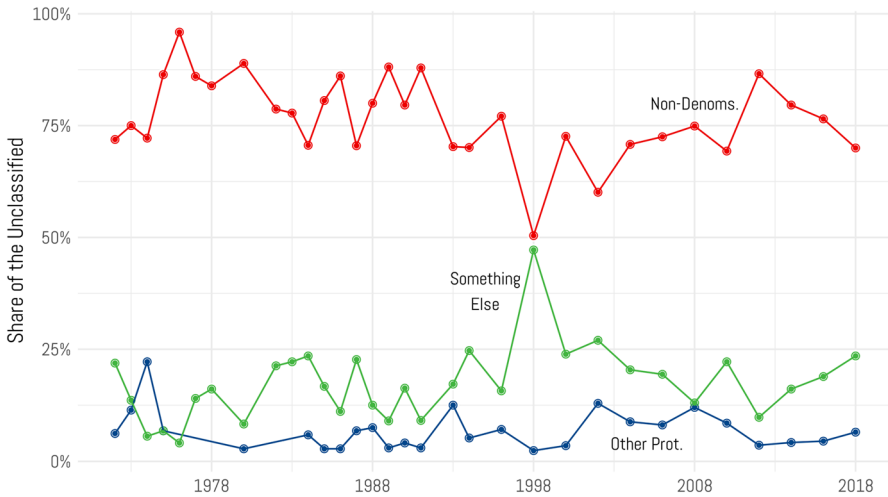


Fig. 2 Most of the unclassifieds are non-denominational. *Source:* GSS, 1972–2018

was 46 in 2018 compared to 49 years old for the overall population, a gap which is not significant. The gender breakdown for the Unclassifieds is no different than that of the GSS sample as a whole, either.

How Do Unclassifieds Compare?

Our task is to examine the assumption that low attending non-denominationalists are so distinctive that they should be excluded from the sample. We get a sense of where they fit compared to other large Protestant traditions. The most likely spots to sort the majority of the Unclassifieds are either the evangelical or mainline categories. Thus, comparing non-denominationalists to these groups is instructive. There is no clearer standard bearer of evangelical Protestants than the Southern Baptist Convention. It is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States (Pipes 2016), although its share of Americans has been in a gradual decline over the last ten years (Shellnut 2019). Its mix of conservative theology and Republican politics makes it an ideal example of how researchers conceptualize the evangelical identity. If one is looking for a good reference case for mainline Protestants, the United Methodist Church is the clear choice. It is the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States (Robertson and Dias 2020). While their politics still lean toward the Republican Party, they have embraced a more moderate theology that welcomes female pastors, although they are in the process of a denominational division over the issue of same-sex marriage (Anderson 2020).

One key comparison is the distribution of church attendance among Southern Baptists, United Methodists, and non-denominational Protestants. Recall that in the RELTRAD framework, a United Methodist is sorted into the mainline category, while all non-black Southern Baptists are considered to be evangelicals regardless

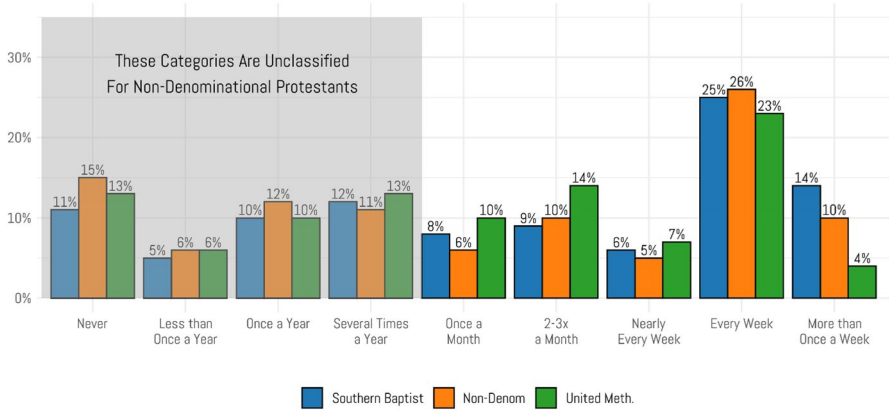


Fig. 3 Attendance distribution of religious traditions. *Source:* GSS 2010–2018

of attendance level. For non-denominational to be classified at all, and then only as evangelicals, they must attend services at least once a month or more. This split is indicated by the shaded box in Fig. 3.

The portion of each of the three groups that falls into the shaded box is very similar—38% of Southern Baptists attend church several times a year or less and it’s slightly higher for United Methodists at 42%. The share of non-denominational who attend less than twelve times a year is 44%. From this angle, it would appear that the share of low attending evangelicals looks very similar to non-denominational, yet RELTRAD excludes over four in ten non-denominational from any religious classification. It keeps the full share of Southern Baptists, even though their attendance is very similar in frequency to non-denominational.

Generally, there are not large differences in attendance among the three Protestant denominations. For instance, there is no statistical difference in the share of each group that says that they never attend church services. At the top end of the scale, it does appear that non-denominational are slightly less likely to attend church at least once a week. However, when the top two categories are combined, the disparity narrows. While 39% of Southern Baptists attend weekly, it’s 27% for United Methodists, and 36% for non-denominational. That is, non-denominational show attendance patterns like other Protestants.

Are Non-denominational Attenders Similar to Denominationalists?

It is imperative to re-examine the logic of classifying non-denominational/no-denominational religion into evangelicals for those who attend at least once a month and marking those who attend less than that as Unclassified. Steensland et al. (2000) write that, “(non-denom/nodenom) respondents who attend church frequently are similar in attitudes and behavior to evangelical Protestants” (298). Recall that RELTRAD was first published nearly two decades ago, when those who selected the non-denominational or “other” option were 29% of all Protestants. But, in 2018,

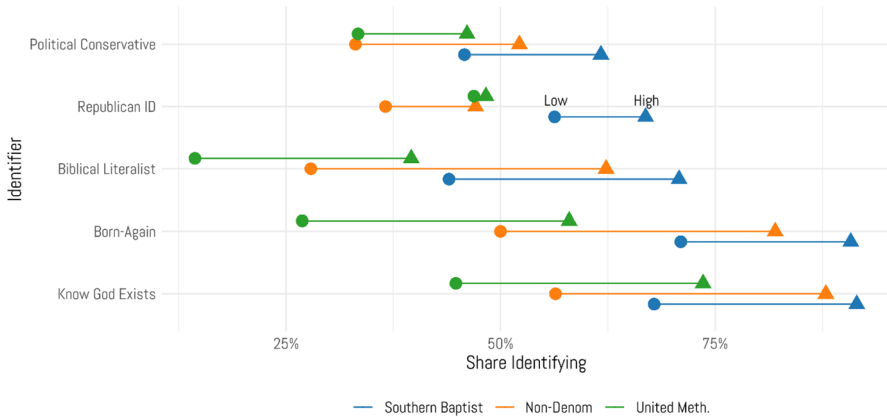


Fig. 4 Comparing non-denominational respondents with religious traditions, by low and high attendance levels. *Source:* GSS, 2010–2018

that was 47% of all of those who answered the denominational question. Moreover, recent analyses have suggested that denominational religion is substantively different from those who don't affiliate with an established Protestant tradition (Blinded).

To test the assertion by Steensland et al. that high attending non-denominational respondents are similar to evangelicals and those who attended a lower amount were substantively distinct, we divided United Methodist, Southern Baptist, and non-denominational respondents based on their attendance level as prescribed by the RELTRAD authors. We also limited the analysis to the last eight years of the GSS. We then calculated the mean for a number of descriptive variables that gauged religious belief: the share who were biblical literalists, those who claimed a born-again identity, and the portion who said that they believed that God existed without any doubt. We also included two measures of political identity: the share who identified with the Republican Party, and those who described their political ideology as conservative. The point estimates are visualized below in Fig. 4, and the horizontal lines denote 84% confidence intervals.²

On measures of religious belief and identity, it is clear that high-attending non-denominational Protestants look very similar to Southern Baptists. In fact, there is no statistical difference between the two groups on measures that tap into belief in God, and the share who identify as born-again or evangelical. On both counts, United Methodists are clearly distinct. United Methodists are also less likely to be biblical literalists. Just about 4 in 10 members of the UMC believe that the Bible

² It is commonplace to simply apply 95% confidence intervals on all visuals. However, comparison of multiple 95 percent intervals is a much more restrictive test (equivalent to a $p < 0.01$ test) than assessing whether a mean difference is different from zero with 95 percent confidence (Knol et al. 2011). Multiple sources recommend translating statistical tests into graphic confidence intervals that mimic the desired test—the non-overlap of two 84 percent confidence intervals is the equivalent of a single 95 percent test of significance, such as a t-test (Goldstein and Healy 1995; Knol et al. 2011; MacGregor-Fors and Payton 2013; Payton et al. 2003).

is literally true, compared to 61% of non-denominational Protestants and 71% of Southern Baptists. Here, there is some separation between the prototypical evangelicals and non-denominationals. On matters of politics, the differences are small. For instance, there is no statistical difference in the share of non-denominationals and UMC members identifying as a Republican, while Southern Baptists stand out with a higher rate. Likewise, United Methodists and non-denominationals are less likely to identify as politically conservative compared to Southern Baptists. Thus, we can say that the logic that motivated the creators of RELTRAD to place high-attending non-denominationals in the evangelical camp still finds empirical support in more recent data, at least in terms of religious measures, if not politics.

However, where do low-attending non-denominationals fit compared to United Methodists and Southern Baptists? The picture here is not nearly as clear. While Fig. 4 indicates that on most religious measures high attending non-denominationals look like high-attending Southern Baptists, that's not the case among those who attend less than once a month. In fact, on the three measures of religious belief—doubts about God, having a born-again identity, and biblical literalism—non-denominationals are clearly less conservative than Southern Baptists, but are not as liberal as United Methodists.

On measures of political ideology and partisanship, the picture becomes even more clouded. For instance, when calculating the share of each of the three groups that identify as politically conservative, there is no statistical difference between the UMC and non-denominational samples. In comparison, low-attending Southern Baptists are slightly more likely to identify as politically conservative, although the total difference is not substantively large (just about 9%). In terms of political partisanship, non-denominationals are the outlier with a smaller portion of Republican identifiers. One of the reasons is that while just 33% of United Methodists identify as politically conservative, 47% identify as Republicans. This gap is much narrower for Southern Baptists (five percentage points) and non-denominationals (four percentage points). This serves to make non-denominationals stand out from the other two groups.

Among high attenders, it's clear that non-denominationals tend to have religious beliefs similar to evangelical Southern Baptists, but their politics are distinct, and there is yet another pattern among those who attend less frequently. Low-attending non-denominationals are neither mainline nor evangelical in their theological outlook and stand somewhere between these two groups. On measures of partisanship, there is some substantive difference between non-denominationals and Southern Baptists, and they look more like mainline Protestants.³

There is one other way to use this figure and that is to compare the effect of attendance for the three groups across these measures. In almost every case, those who attend less often adopt more liberal positions on religious beliefs and political

³ We have included a direct comparison of these five identifiers among low attending vs high attending non-denominationals, United Methodists, and Southern Baptists in Fig. 11 in the "Appendix". As can be ascertained, the attendance divide between non-denominationals is substantively larger than it is for UMC or SBC adherents.

identities. And the sizes of those effects are relatively even across the three groups. The partisanship gap generated by attendance for non-denominationals is about the same as for Southern Baptists. The ideology gap among non-denominationals is a bit larger than the other two, but not by much. The gap is demonstrably larger for non-denominationals in their identification as a biblical literalist, but again about the same for being born again and knowing that god exists. That is strong evidence that low attending non-denominationals are affiliated in about the same way that low-attending denominationals are.

There's a danger at this juncture to make classification decisions to emphasize fit—this is also known as selecting on the dependent variable. We should try to avoid that as well as adopt rules that can apply universally. Because non-denominationals do not have collective organizational histories and statements of commitments, they subvert the usual decisions rules about how to treat them as a group. In the end, it is this fact that we key on, as well as nascent empirical evidence, to advocate for a particular option for their treatment.

Ways Forward

From the prior analysis, there are two central takeaways. The first is that the attendance filter used to bifurcate the non-denom/nodenom sample is no longer tenable, nor sensible. When RELTRAD was first proposed, just 2% of individuals fell into the unclassified category—however, that number has risen to over 6% now which makes it clear that retaining the attendance filter is tremendously expensive, if nothing else. Moreover, huge swaths of American religious identifiers are low to never attenders. There needs to be a carefully considered revision to RELTRAD that will sort as many people as possible into identifiable categories of American religion.

However, how to fix this problem is not obvious. High attending non-denominationals do look like evangelical Christians. The problem arises when considering non-denominationals who attend with less regularity. They don't look like evangelicals in terms of political or religious viewpoints, but they are also somewhat less liberal on matters of religiosity and ideology than the mainline United Methodists. Therefore, we will offer up several possibilities to resolve this classification problem. Each has a number of positive and negative implications for measuring American religion, and clearly none is perfect.

Option 1: Apply the Attendance Filter Universally

One possibility is to simply apply the attendance filter universally so that all nominal affiliates are shuffled off from their religious coil. This would place all high-attending non-denominationals into the evangelical category. We would lose the widespread sense of religious identity that many Americans still have, but we would have a much clearer picture of just how weak religious organizational attachments actually are (Figs. 5, 6).

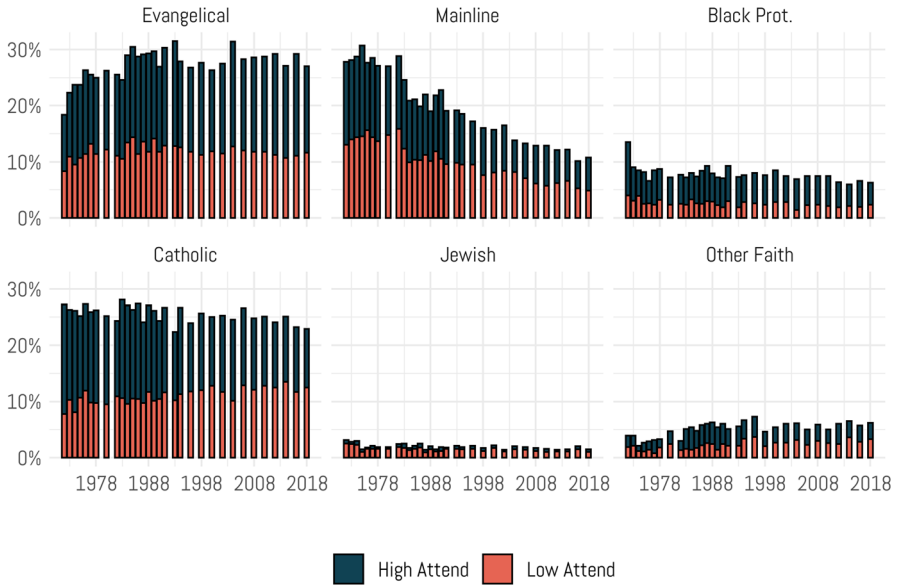


Fig. 5 How using a consistent attendance filter changes american religion. *Source:* GSS, 1972–2018

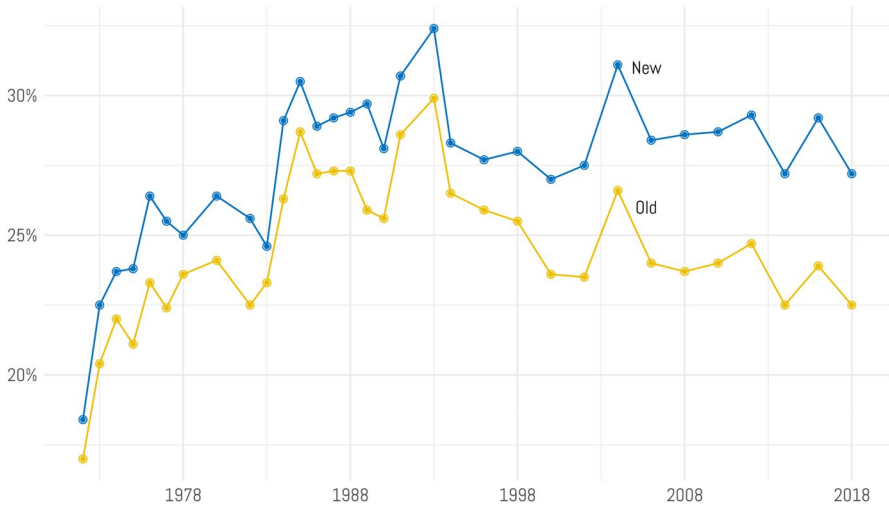


Fig. 6 Adding all non-denominationalists to the evangelical category. *Source:* GSS, 1972–2018

If all non-denominationalists were lumped into the evangelical category without regard for their church attendance, this would obviously make evangelicals a larger share of the population since the population is shrunk by the attender filter—27% in 2018, which is an increase of nearly five percentage points from the current REL-TRAD calculation. However, the split between high attending and low attending

evangelicals is noteworthy. 15% of all Americans are high attending evangelicals, compared to 12% who attend less than once in a month—that's due to the fact that 43% of evangelicals are nominal. The other traditions do not grow larger in overall size by employing the attendance filter, but it does show how few of them are attending on a regular basis. For instance, six in ten mainline Protestants fall in the high church attendance category, while four in ten are low attenders. For Catholics, the low attenders outpaced the higher attenders in 2018 (13% vs 10%). In sum, nearly three in ten Americans are marginally attached Christians who could be dropped from the analysis if treated the same way as non-denominationals.

However, we must be realistic. Researchers cannot simply cut 30% of the sample (by excluding the low attenders) and expect to be taken seriously. But seeing the size of the nominally religious is a useful exercise, in part because this population has been growing steadily since the 1990s. Researchers need to be prepared to grapple with the fact that fewer and fewer religious identifiers are meaningfully exposed to social dynamics within American congregations. Put another way, more and more Americans are becoming RINOs (religious in name only) every year, which is only a short leap to status as a none (e.g., Djupe et al. 2018).

Option 2: Classify all Non-denominationals as Evangelicals

Perhaps the most straightforward path forward is to simply remove the attendance filter and convert all Protestants who identify as non-denominational or without a denomination as evangelicals. This has the benefit of simplicity and creates a consistent framework for non-denominationals, making them akin to other evangelical denominations like Southern Baptists. But, this choice has obvious implications for the size of religious traditions that may not be warranted.

In the first two decades of the General Social Survey, this does not increase the size of the evangelical category substantially. For instance, in 1972 it increased the evangelical share just over 1%. But, because the number of Americans who identify as non-denominational has increased significantly, that would translate to a much higher share of evangelicals in the last few years. In 2018, the prior version of RELTRAD classified 23% of Americans as evangelicals; this new approach places that figure much higher—at 27%. Using the framework proposed by Steensland et al. (2000), the share of Catholics, evangelicals, and the religiously unaffiliated are statistically the same in 2018. This new conception would push the share of evangelicals to be the largest religious tradition in the United States, which may be confusing for casual observers of American religion.

Option 3: Classify Low-Attending Non-denominationals as Mainline Protestants

If we are operating under the assumption that the Unclassifieds have to be sorted into an existing RELTRAD category, then a third option is to place some of them into the mainline Protestant group. As previously discussed, there are some instances in which

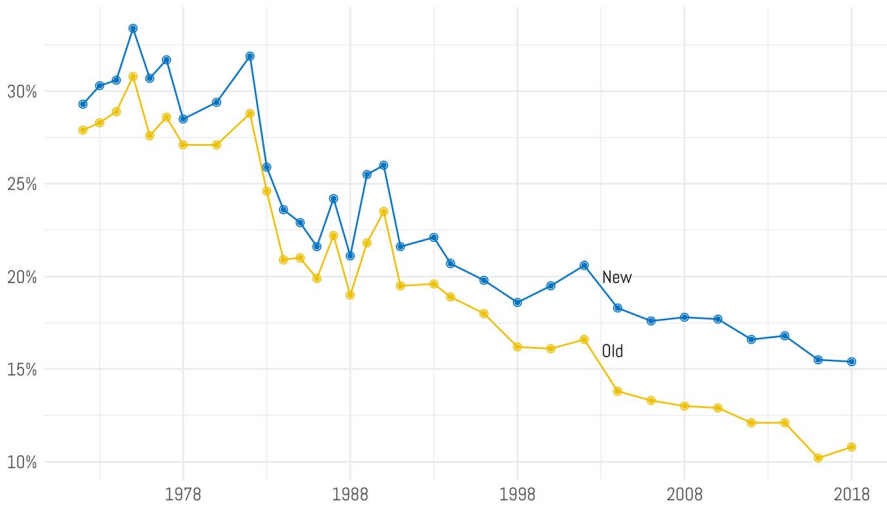


Fig. 7 Adding low attending non-denominationals to the mainline category. *Source:* GSS, 1972–2018

non-denominationals who attend church less than once a month have similar characteristics to United Methodists than they have in common with Southern Baptists. The end result of making this switch is visualized in Fig. 7; recall that this will have no effect on any other RELTRAD group as low attending non-denominationals were not sorted into any other tradition before this.

The result is a less bleak picture for the future of the mainline Protestant tradition. For instance, using the prior version of RELTRAD, mainline Protestants were just 10% of the sample in 2016. If these unclassifieds were grouped together with mainliners, then the end result is that just over 15% of Americans were mainline in 2016. That would come as good news to those in the mainline tradition, but it makes little sense from a theoretical perspective. It strikes us as awkward that non-denominationals who attended frequently were placed in one tradition, while those down the pew who attended less were put into another category. Put another way, mainline Protestants are not just less observant evangelicals; mainline Protestantism is, canonically, a denominational enterprise. The original logic of RELTRAD was to specify the organizational location of the individual. People in the same sanctuary should not be differentiated in the classification scheme by their attendance levels. There is a sizable movement of “community churches”—about a quarter of non-denominational identifiers—who have more in common with mainline Protestants and consider themselves interdenominational. Otherwise, non-denominationalism is largely evangelical, at least consistent with the individualism of evangelicalism.

Option 4: Classify Low-Attending Non-denominationals as Nones

Thus far we have explored two potential ways to sort low attending non-denominational Protestants—classify them into the evangelical category or align them with mainline Protestants. However, the data doesn’t seem to merit taking either

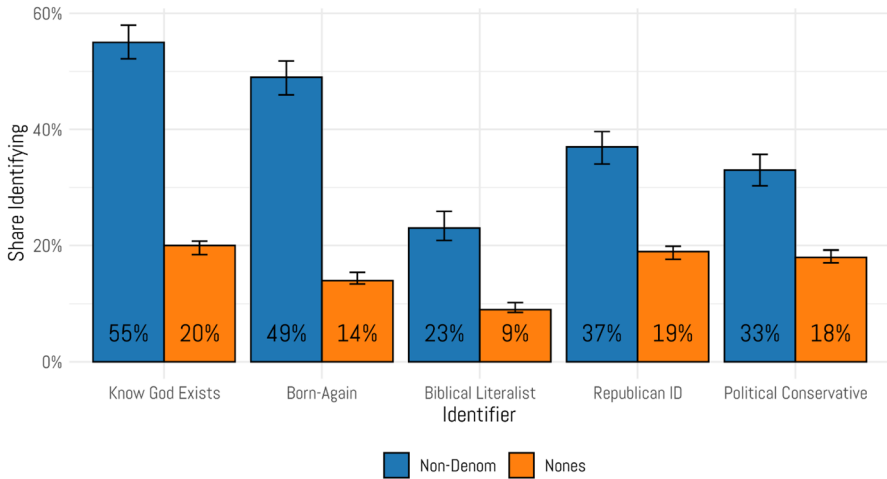


Fig. 8 Comparing low-attending non-denominational Christians with the nones. *Source:* GSS, 2010–2018

approach. There remains one other existing bucket to place this group in. If these individuals are already infrequent church attenders, it seems likely that many of them could share characteristics with the religiously unaffiliated. This approach would be justified if these low attenders held similar opinions about theological and political issues as the nones.

To test that we compared low-attending non-denominational Christians with the religiously unaffiliated on the six dimensions that were discussed in Fig. 4. It quickly becomes apparent that these two groups of respondents are substantively distinct on all six factors. For instance, over half of low-attending, non-denominational Christians have a strong belief in God, while it's just one in five of the nones. Half of low-attending, non-denominational Christians have had a born-again experience; it's just 14% of the nones. Non-denominational Christians are twice as likely to be biblical literalists and identify with the Republican Party and nearly twice as likely to embrace the conservative moniker. Clearly, low-attending non-denominational Christians are much too religious to be lumped in with the “no religion” camp (Figs. 8, 9).

Option 5: Create an Entirely New RELTRAD Category

The other viable option that remains may be the most radical. We follow Shelton and Cobb (2017) to recommend adding an entirely new category to RELTRAD for those who respond to the question about religious affiliation by claiming that they are non-denominational, have no denomination, identify as Protestant but don't know which specific tradition, or those who claim just a generic Christian identity. This growing set of groups together would be the fourth largest of any religious tradition. This has the benefit of removing the attendance filter for all religious traditions. It also makes clear that non-denominational Christians are

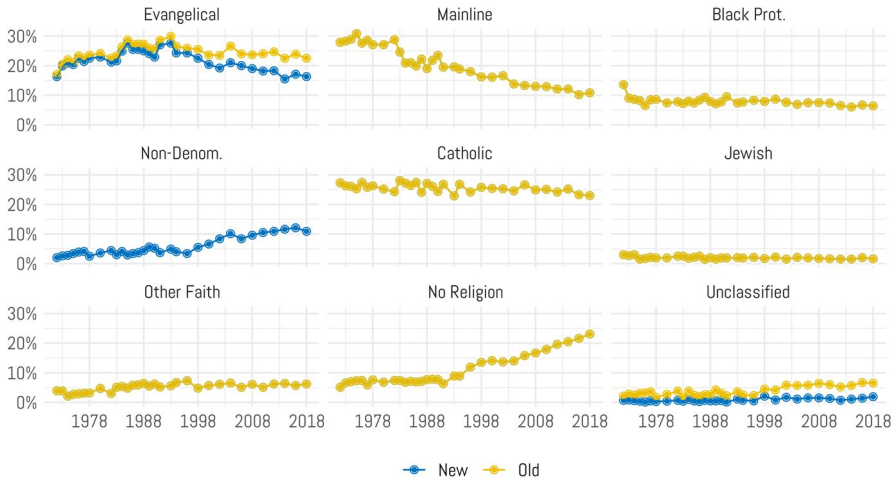


Fig. 9 Creating a new non-denominational category. *Source:* GSS, 1972–2018

growing, are potentially having an increasing influence on Christianity, and need to be understood as a separate category within American Protestantism. It therefore would be helpful to rename evangelicals as “denominational evangelicals” to make clear that non-denominationalists have clearly shed the particularistic denominational identity.

This option loses steam if a nondenominational identity is a difference without a distinction. Indeed, there appears to be pressure on denominational churches to rebrand themselves as independent, primarily by changing their names. But even though non-denominationalists appear to share many religious attributes with evangelicals, forthcoming work demonstrates a wide variety of dissimilarities in the effect of nondenominational church involvement on social ties, social orientations, and political involvement (blind for review). On this basis of these differences, we support the creation of a separate category.

The implications of making this addition only shift two specific groups: evangelicals and those who are unclassified. Obviously, this framework will reduce the share of Americans who are evangelicals. Again, this does not make a large difference in the size of evangelicals until the late 1990’s. By 2000, the new framework classifies 20% of respondents into the evangelical camp vs. 24% using the prior version of RELTRAD. By 2018, this gap nearly doubles to 7% (16 vs. 23%).

The other implication, of course, is that the Unclassifieds dramatically shrink. While they currently stand at 6.5% using the prior version of RELTRAD, under the new framework they are just 2% of the population—now made up entirely of people who just don’t answer the religion questions. That is an ideal outcome.

A final upshot of moving to this additional category is that it clearly illustrates a crucial shift in American religion—away from denominational forms of Protestant Christianity and toward a faith that is less centrally organized. The public can understand that while some types of faith are holding steady (denominational evangelicals, black Protestants, Catholics), there are two other groups that are increasing

in size—non-denominationals and those of no religious affiliation. We believe that both stories are worth bringing front and center and that’s what this approach accomplishes.

Implications of a New Category

If RELTRAD is expanded by adding a new category for non-denominational Protestants, what implications does that choice have on modeling going forward? To test that we replicated a model found in the original analysis for RELTRAD that used church attendance as the dependent variable (Steensland et al. 2000, 302). In addition, we added five more multivariate tests that included the following as dependent variables: biblical literalism, claiming a born-again identity, identifying with the Republican party, a certain belief in God, and a conservative political ideology. The prior models had controls for black, age, education, gender, the year of the GSS, income, and a dummy variable for those living in the South. In addition, we included our new RELTRAD categories and set the reference category to the same one used by Steensland et al.—those without a religious affiliation. A simple linear regression was conducted for the attendance model and a logit model was specified for the other five dependent variables with the outcome visualized as a coefficient plot in Fig. 10 with robust standard errors and 95% confidence intervals. The R^2 was included in each plot for both the model using the prior version of RELTRAD, as well as the newly proposed version. Additionally, the independent variables were scaled 0–1 so that interpretations of effect sizes can be easily discerned. The interpretation of the model is straightforward—if the point estimate and confidence intervals don’t overlap with the vertical, dashed line on zero, the coefficient is significant. If it is to the right of zero, it predicts higher levels of the dependent variable—lower levels are predicted to the left of zero.⁴

First note that in the case of the control variables there are no statistically significant differences between the prior and new models regardless of the dependent variable, so there is little to report on this front. Thus, we can turn our focus to how the category of “denominational evangelical” changes in the prior version of RELTRAD compared to our new proposed version. In five of the six cases, there is no statistically significant difference between how the evangelical categorical variable behaves in the old version compared to the new one. The only divergence is in the top left panel where the dependent variable is church attendance. Using the prior typology, there is a stronger positive relationship between being an evangelical and attending church services. In the new proposal, that impact is somewhat muted. Why is this the case? It’s because the prior version of RELTRAD had higher attendance baked into the category because non-denominational Protestants were sorted into the evangelical category based on an attendance filter. Once that filter is removed, the coefficient becomes smaller.

The results of the multivariate analysis place non-denominationals right in line with where we would expect them to fall given Fig. 4. On measures of religiosity,

⁴ We have also included all regression tables in the “Appendix” (Table 1) with robust standard errors.

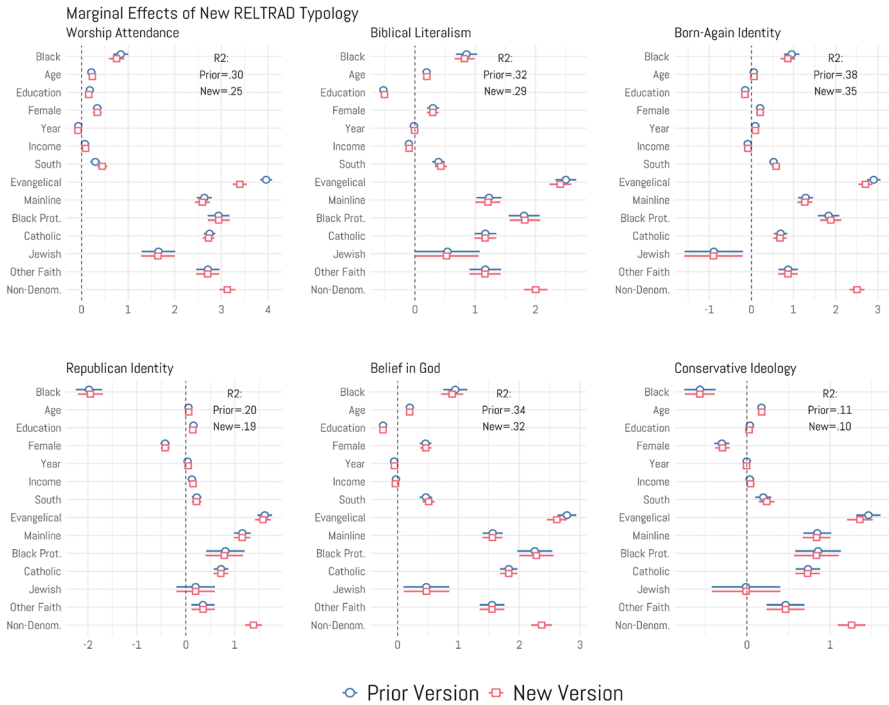


Fig. 10 Model estimates using the old and newly proposed RELTRAD schemes. *Source:* GSS, 2010–2018

they are slightly to the left of evangelicals, but to the right of mainline Protestants. When it comes to political ideology and partisanship, there is no statistical difference between non-denominational Protestants and denominational evangelicals.

As can be seen from the R^2 , the differences in the goodness of fit using the prior version of RELTRAD and the proposed version are small. It would be fair to say that this new framework does not create a substantively worse model than the prior version of RELTRAD, though the proportion of variation explained does decrease.

Conclusions and Implications

This new version of RELTRAD succeeds in remedying one of the primary problems of the previous framework that was excluding a larger share of respondents from the sample in each successive year. At the same time, these multivariate results indicate that the models with an additional category for non-denominational Protestants added perform no poorer than the prior version of RELTRAD.

In recent years, a cottage industry has popped up among those who study religion to try and understand the implications that RELTRAD has had on the way that we think about the American religious landscape (see, e.g., *Journal for the Scientific*

Study of Religion, Volume 57, Issue 4). We fully recognize that RELTRAD is not going away any time soon. It gives researchers a simple and well-organized framework for placing respondents into easy to remember and, more or less, theoretically coherent categories. The creation and implementation of RELTRAD has done a great service to those of us who want to describe American religion. So, instead of advocating for a total reconfiguration of the typology, we instead suggest a modification based on how American religion is changing.

Non-denominational Protestant Christianity was just 8% of all Protestant Christians when the original version of RELTRAD was published. Obviously, the authors of the original scheme could not have guessed that in just two decades the share of non-denominational Protestants would nearly triple in size. Thus, our suggestion is an amendment to RELTRAD—add a non-denominational category that will solve two significant problems. First, it will reduce the size of the unclassified category from over six percent to under two percent. It has become impossible to ignore the fact that such a large portion of the population is excluded from the analysis. The second problem that this new proposal overcomes is that it does not conflate religious identity with religious behavior. Instead, the entire scheme is based on identity with denominations among Protestants and religious traditions among others. Given what proportion could be screened out as non-identifiers given their low attendance levels, RELTRAD should be understood as an identity-based scheme. The end result is what we believe to be more accurate modeling, especially when those models are using worship attendance as either a dependent or independent variable.

Any classification scheme of American religion is a product of the era in which it was created in. As RELTRAD achieves twenty years of widespread use in our sub-field, we believe that this amendment will continue to make it viable for many years in the future.

Appendix

See Table 1 and Fig. 11.

Table 1 Comparison of prior and new versions of RELTRAD across 5 dependent variables (results visualized in Fig. 10)

	Attend— prior	Attend—new	Literal— prior	Literal—new	B. Again— prior	B. Again— new
Black	0.84* (0.08)	0.75* (0.08)	0.86* (0.09)	0.82* (0.08)	0.96* (0.09)	0.86* (0.09)
Age	0.21* (0.03)	0.23* (0.03)	0.19* (0.03)	0.20* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	0.06* (0.02)
Education	0.18* (0.03)	0.16* (0.03)	-0.52* (0.03)	-0.51* (0.03)	-0.15* (0.03)	-0.15* (0.03)
Female	0.34* (0.05)	0.34* (0.05)	0.30* (0.05)	0.30* (0.05)	0.21* (0.05)	0.21* (0.05)
Year	-0.07* (0.02)	-0.08* (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.09* (0.03)	0.09* (0.02)
Income	0.07* (0.03)	0.09* (0.03)	-0.10* (0.03)	-0.10* (0.02)	-0.09* (0.03)	-0.08* (0.03)
South	0.30* (0.05)	0.45* (0.05)	0.39* (0.05)	0.43* (0.05)	0.53* (0.05)	0.58* (0.05)
Evangelical	3.96* (0.07)	3.40* (0.08)	2.50* (0.09)	2.41* (0.09)	2.90* (0.08)	2.71* (0.09)
Mainline	2.64* (0.08)	2.59* (0.08)	1.23* (0.11)	1.21* (0.10)	1.29* (0.09)	1.27* (0.09)
Black Prot	2.94* (0.12)	2.94* (0.12)	1.81* (0.13)	1.82* (0.13)	1.83* (0.13)	1.88* (0.13)
Catholic	2.75* (0.06)	2.73* (0.06)	1.17* (0.09)	1.16* (0.09)	0.69* (0.08)	0.68* (0.08)
Jewish	1.65* (0.18)	1.64* (0.18)	0.54* (0.27)	0.52 (0.27)	-0.89* (0.35)	-0.90* (0.35)
Other	2.71* (0.13)	2.71* (0.13)	1.17* (0.13)	1.16* (0.13)	0.87* (0.12)	0.87* (0.12)
Non-Denom		3.13* (0.09)		2.00* (0.10)		2.51* (0.09)
N	9613	10,153	9377	9909	9484	10,018
R2	0.30	0.25	0.32	0.29	0.38	0.35
	GOP—prior	GOP—new	Belief—prior	Belief—new	Cons.—prior	Cons.—new
Black	-1.98* (0.14)	-1.95* (0.13)	0.95* (0.10)	0.90* (0.09)	-0.56* (0.10)	-0.57* (0.09)
Age	0.05* (0.02)	0.06* (0.02)	0.20* (0.03)	0.20* (0.02)	0.17* (0.02)	0.18* (0.02)
Education	0.16* (0.02)	0.14* (0.02)	-0.24* (0.03)	-0.24* (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Female	-0.42* (0.05)	-0.42* (0.05)	0.46* (0.05)	0.47* (0.05)	-0.30* (0.05)	-0.29* (0.05)

Table 1 (continued)

	GOP—prior	GOP—new	Belief—prior	Belief—new	Cons.—prior	Cons.—new
Year	0.04 (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	-0.06* (0.02)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)
Income	0.12* (0.03)	0.15* (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
South	0.22* (0.05)	0.22* (0.05)	0.47* (0.05)	0.51* (0.05)	0.20* (0.05)	0.24* (0.05)
Evangelical	1.61* (0.08)	1.57* (0.08)	2.79* (0.08)	2.62* (0.08)	1.46* (0.07)	1.36* (0.08)
Mainline	1.15* (0.09)	1.15* (0.09)	1.56* (0.08)	1.56* (0.08)	0.85* (0.09)	0.84* (0.09)
Black Prot	0.81* (0.20)	0.79* (0.20)	2.26* (0.15)	2.28* (0.14)	0.85* (0.14)	0.84* (0.14)
Catholic	0.72* (0.08)	0.72* (0.08)	1.83* (0.07)	1.83* (0.07)	0.73* (0.08)	0.73* (0.08)
Jewish	0.20 (0.20)	0.20 (0.20)	0.47* (0.19)	0.48* (0.19)	-0.01 (0.21)	-0.01 (0.21)
Other	0.35* (0.12)	0.35* (0.12)	1.55* (0.10)	1.55* (0.10)	0.46* (0.12)	0.46* (0.12)
Non-Denom		1.38* (0.09)		2.37* (0.09)		1.26* (0.08)
N	9308	9828	9573	10,112	9327	9849
R2	0.20	0.19	0.34	0.32	0.11	0.10

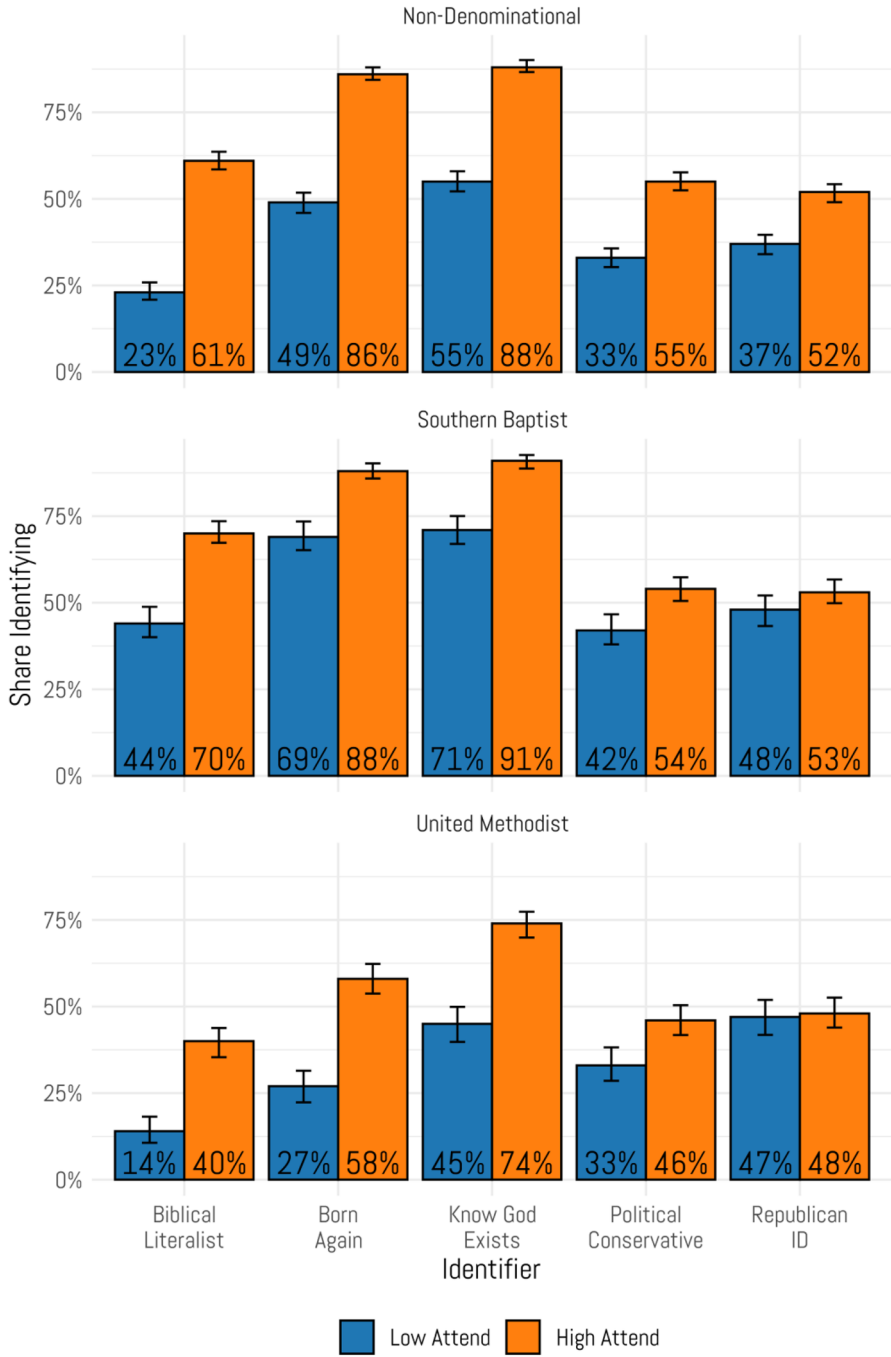


Fig. 11 Share identifying with key political/religious terms by attendance. Source: GSS 2010–2018

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